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Illegal Israeli actions in Occupied East Jerusalem and the rest of the Occupied Palestinian Territory

Security Council
Fifty-eighth year

Letter dated 20 February 2003 from the Chairman of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People addressed to the Secretary-General

In my capacity as Chairman of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, I am writing this letter to express grave concern over a plan of the Israeli military authorities to evict Palestinian residents and seize land in Bethlehem.

The Committee has received reports that, on 16 February 2003, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) distributed military orders to Palestinians in northern Bethlehem, instructing them to vacate their homes and shops in the area near the northern entrance to the city. The army indicated that the order was valid until 2005, but could be extended. The Palestinians believe that these measures form part of an Israeli Government plan that will have their neighbourhood cut off from the rest of the city by a separation wall. The planned wall, at least 25 feet high, will run between Rachel's Tomb and an IDF checkpoint several kilometres to the north and will completely envelope their land and the southern edge of Jerusalem. Israeli Government officials claim that the wall would protect Jewish worshippers visiting Rachel's Tomb. The shrine, however, has always been part of Bethlehem and an important pilgrimage site for people of the three monotheistic religions.

If the occupying Power is allowed to proceed with the construction of the wall, some 3,500 dunams (875 acres) of land in the neighbourhood may be confiscated. Many factories, stores, tourist facilities, a petrol station and a hospital are located in this economically vital area of the city. Moreover, this action would cause a major disruption of the economic activity in the city and the surrounding areas and result in a considerable restriction of the freedom of movement of Palestinians. The latter would also be in clear violation of the Israeli-Palestinian Interim Agreement on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip of 1995 (annex I, article V, section 7).

Over the past two years, the Committee has been increasingly alarmed by the Israeli Government's efforts at implementing the so-called "seam line area plan", a unilateral separation scheme that envisions various types of barriers, with buffer

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zones running to the east of the Green Line. In fact, sections of such barriers are now under construction in parts of the West Bank. In the process, Palestinian homes are being demolished and swathes of lands are being bulldozed and seized. The continuation of this policy is bound to exacerbate tensions on the ground and heighten resentment among the Palestinian population. The plan is also creating artificial boundaries that predetermine the outcome of future permanent status negotiations between the two sides.

As regards the latest developments in Bethlehem, we should not lose sight of the fact that for three years in a row, in resolutions entitled "Bethlehem 2000", the General Assembly came out united in expressing the need for an immediate change of the situation on the ground in the city and its vicinity, especially with regard to ensuring freedom of movement. The Assembly also stressed the need for ensuring free and unhindered access to the holy places in Bethlehem to the faithful of all religions and the citizens of all nationalities. It is now incumbent on all of us to rekindle the spirit that brought us together in 1998-2000 and do everything possible to prevent the drawing of painful dividing lines in one of the most historic and revered places on earth.

On behalf of the Committee, I would like to express the hope that you would be in a position to use your good offices with the Government of Israel in order to prevent the planned division of the Palestinian city of Bethlehem and to stop the implementation of the separation plan throughout the Occupied Palestinian Territory.

I should be grateful if you would have the present letter circulated as a document of the tenth emergency special session of the General Assembly, under agenda item 5, and of the Security Council.

(*Signed*) Papa Louis **Fall**
Chairman
Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable
Rights of the Palestinian People